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ABSTRACT

This discussion of professional ethics for educational technologists argues that such ethics can and should be based, not on public discussion, but on "virtuous behavior," a trait-like behavior that meets or exceeds the commonly held virtues of the profession and is fostered by associations of professionals. Such virtues are based on moral principles and rules and moral reasoning. It is argued, however, that promotion of such virtuous behavior must go beyond merely publishing a code of ethics without any further explanation or application and interpretation in the training context. It is suggested that both moral principles and moral reasoning be studied further in the context of professional behavior, and explored in both the professional literature and training programs. In addition, the code of ethics should be reexamined and clarified, and the dispositions or traits of virtuous professionals should be more carefully described, analyzed, and promulgated. (5 references) (EW)

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Professional Ethics: An Analysis of Some Arguments for Development of Virtuous Behavior

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After a long period of relative inactivity, we have seen a resurgence in interest in the topic of professional ethics in ours and related fields. Recent activation of our Professional Ethics Committee, convention sessions like the one today, articles in professional and scholarly journals, all signal a level of interest that has not been present for several years. It is not an original thought that the wide-spread reporting of misconduct on the part of business leaders, financial traders and professionals of all sorts, is a significant cause of this resurgence of interest. The general hypothesis seems to be these public failures are a symptom of a general shift in the moral values that guide behavior between and among professionals and clients in our society.

A major assumption of this paper is that much of the public discussion is irrelevant to our concerns as professionals. The "micro" moral decision making processes that constitute the day to day fabric of ethical behavior hold much more philosophic and psychological interest to practicing professionals. The personal failures that are publicly reported are qualitatively different and although that may be the result of an aggregate of ethical decisions across time, they are not very interesting in either a philosophical or psychological sense. They provide little useful content for a philosophic or psychological analysis of the conditions that promote virtuous behavior.

The major premise of this paper is that virtuous behavior, (Frankena 1976) trait-like behavior that meets or exceeds the commonly held values of the profession, can be fostered by associations' of professionals. This virtuous behavior must be well understood and modeled if this influence is to benefit the profession.

Before more specific issues can be discussed, a number of definitions must be considered. First principles or moral rules (Frankena 1976) are often suggested or implied in professional codes of ethics. In the AECT Code of Ethics, (Human Resources Directory, Page 6) several commonly held moral roles may be tacitly seen in the twenty two secondary principles stated in the code. The rule "do no harm", may be inferred in Section I, item 4, "Shall conduct business so as to protect the privacy and maintain the personal integrity of the individual." The rule "treat all equally" may be inferred in Section II, Item 5, "Shall engage in fair and equitable practices with those rendering service to the profession." These general rules or first principles are not easily derived in a philosophic sense. Some philosophers argue that these principles are a part of our basic nature, (Ross. W.D.) some others argue that they can be empirically derived. (Rashdall, H.) In any event, these first principles often form the core of beliefs of religious groups, societies, or professional groups. It is curious that these principals are rarely made explicit. They seem to be assumed as a part of the implicit norms of the group of individuals who hold these views, especially in professional societies.

These moral rules are most often used in the manner of Socrates when in engaged in moral reasoning. (Frankena 1973) If, for example, an educational technologist has completed an analysis of different computers to deliver instruction for his/her institution and two or more vendors could successfully compete to fulfill the technical requirements of the analysis, the first principle,"treat all equally" and "do no harm" could be shown to be applicable to the situation in which two or more vendors were competing for the right to sell the computers. Further, if one of the vendors offered a personal gratuity to the educational technologist, the technologist could reason: "If I accept the gratuity, I will not be treating the vendors equally, and, "If I accept the gratuity, I will be harming the reputation of my institution and my profession." Both of these logical moves bring the principle together with the facts relevant to the decision to be made. Then the educational technologist would come to the conclusion that he/she could not accept the gratuity even if the bid for the computers was the lowest competitive bid. This rather abbreviated and straightforward example has the advantage of illustrating the three part process of moral reasoning: 1) statement of first principles, 2) combining first principles with relevant facts, and 3) drawing a conclusion in a rational and dispassionate manner with some understanding of the consequences of the alternatives. In more complex situations, the application of principles may not lead to the same

conclusion. Then it is usually necessary to decide which principle takes precedence. The dialogue in the process of discussing a specific moral decision could well involve the challenge of the principles, the decisions of which rule is more basic or fundamental or the logic by which conclusions were derived from facts and principles.

I have used the term moral several times in this discussion. From the philosophic perspective, ethics is a branch of moral philosophy. (Brody) (Vallance) Moral reasoning defined above is an analytic philosophic process having to do with moral decisions of right and wrong, duty or obligation wherein the alternatives affect individuals or groups of individuals. In our profession, we have a deep and abiding interest in at least two types of moral knowledge. 1) We are often interested in a psychological or anthropological sense in the values or norms of our client systems or our own culture as in Paul Welliver's paper delivered today. We pursue scientific knowledge about moral meaning that affects the conduct of our professional duties. Some times we pursue knowledge to influence the client system in educational or training interventions and at other times, to model in a scientific sense, moral meaning and behavior in our profession. 2) As judging by our collective scholarly behavior, we have an interest but perhaps less abiding in the philosophic questions of what is good or what duties or obligations coincide with our professional status. In section I of our ethical code, (Human Resources Directory, P. 6) our colleagues who wrote the document take it as inherently good that we "promote correct and sound professional practices in the use of technology in education" or that it would be wrong in Section II to "use institutional or associational privileges for private gain." These are philosophic normative assertions of right and wrong. We have, presumably in a scholarly manner, engaged in philosophic reasoning that lead to these assertions. This important form of inquiry is nearly non-existent in our profession.

There is a third kind of philosophic moral inquiry that deals with meta issues that are more often than not left to philosophers. They include such issues as: What is the meaning of good or bad in an expression of moral reasoning?" Or perhaps more relevant to our discussion today, how do we distinguish between moral and non-moral decisions? At any rate, the philosophic inquiry of this type is usually outside the realm of our professional discourse. It is however, quite relevant to our gaining sufficient prowess in ethical decision making over time.

The common use of the terms ethical or moral are usually associated with good and the opposites unethical or immoral are of course associated with bad or wrong motives and subsequent behavior. (Frankena 1973) Philosophers use quite different distinctions that are important to our discussion. Moral is a term that is defined as coordinate with history, science or other disciplines. The opposing terms would be non-moral or non-ethical. So in an expanded process of moral reasoning, the first step would be to distinguish between decisions that are moral or pertain to morality or ethics and those that are technical or non-moral. For example, I once invested a great deal of intellectual energy dialoging with myself about the "ethical" decision of portraying a faculty member as excellent or adequate in a problematic tenure case. After considerable time and energy was invested, I decided that the decision wasn't ethical at all it was non-moral ("non-ethical"). I was being asked to excercise a technical judgment based on the science of my profession. The tenure rules were well understood and accepted by all parties. All parties had acted in a manner consistent with moral rules I knew. The decision could have been ethical or moral if issues of duty, obligation, rightness or wrongness of the process or individual behavior associated with my decision to characterize the faculty member as adequate or excellent had been involved. In this case, I reasoned that there was sufficient evidence to come to a technical judgment based on the evidence at hand. My concern for the faculty member was an emotional concern not primarily related to first principles of right or wrong, duty or obligation.

Virtue is a term not often used in professional prose. Virtue in this context means the disposition to behave in a manner consistent with moral values or moral principles. As noted above, the most important premise of this paper is that we have a professional obligation to create conditions which illicit and promote virtuous conduct. To focus exclusively on moral reasoning or conformity to rules is inconsistent with our professional knowledge. As an applied psychological profession, we certainly believe that complex rule like behavior is not tenable without addressing the motivation or higher order meaning that promotes that behavior. Certainly the publishing of a code of ethics with no provision for explanation, application or interpretation in a training context would be uniformly considered inadequate behavior on the part of qualified instructional designers. One wonders why we find it acceptable to provide this limited training support for practicing professionals in our profession.

What would constitute adequate conditions for fostering virtuous professional behavior in our associations? We certainly should more actively pursue the first two kinds of moral knowledge discussed above. The study of our professional conduct is certainly a proper and worthwhile scholarly goal. We should invest considerable energy in describing moral meaning and behavior in our profession. We would certainly be well advised to model and predict this behavior as well. Our scholarly journals should solicit such inquiry if it is not readily forthcoming. Also, we should use this knowledge to change our training programs and to modify the conduct of our professionals in our society.

In addition, we should encourage our own scholars or solicit philosophers to engage in philosophic inquiry that allowed us to be more clear about the meaning of our moral values. We should define the first order and secondary principles that are relevant to our profession. We should attempt to prioritize our values and examine those priorities in difficult cases. (Vallance)

We should explore moral reasoning in our literature and in our training programs. The process of moral reasoning is largely untaught in our professional programs and it is unexamined in our professional literature. The process requires sophisticated knowledge and reasoning processes. We certainly treat far less important professional goals more seriously than we regard this vital skill.

We should re-examine our professional code of ethics and clarify the scholarly assumptions and analysis that went into the design of the code. Our code is a fairly traditional statement of second order or applied principles of duty and obligation. At a minimum, our more primary principles should be made explicit and examples or case vignettes should be published so that the code of ethics can be applied with more precision and sophistication. It seems that the authors of our code and comparable codes feel that the codes are self evident in their application. Certainly our status as professional educators would suggest fallacy of that assumption.

The dispositions or traits of virtuous professionals should be more carefully described, analyzed and promulgated. If we are serious about our concern for moral decision making in our profession, the best models of this disposition must be made explicit and held up as worthy of emulation. In our pluralistic society, we seem to believe that matters of virtue and moral behavior are not proper concerns for professional dialogue outside the churches, synagogues or other religious institutions of worship. It has

often been my experience that words such as virtue or moral values evoke ridicule or uncomfortable silence in professional dialogue. It seems to me that the very fact of our pluralism argues for a scholarly professional inquiry and development in the ethical issues of our profession. Our duty is to be clear with one another about moral decision making and particularly the conditions that promote virtuous behavior. We seek not to replace our religious institutions we must exceptionally be clear about the moral decision making in those arenas where many ideologies intersect in our society. Otherwise we create an environment of moral uncertainty or professional caveat emptor.

In summary, I should say that there are several limitations to my arguments especially my philosophic arguments. In some cases, time and space did not permit more complete arguments. For example, I have taken a position which philosophers label deontological. (Brody) That is, I speak of moral decision making as a process derived from moral rules or first principles. This position is held in contrast to a teleological position which would argue that first principles cannot be derived and that non-moral good or consequences of moral decisions would be the basis for making moral decisions. Decisions would be made to achieve the greatest good. Interesting and useful arguments about professional ethics could be made from a teleological position. However, the conclusion of this paper would be the same. We have a duty to create greater understanding of and the conditions which promote virtuous behavior. Also, my philosophic arguments are the arguments of a student rather than the master of the discipline. This is the dilemma of many professionals interested in professional ethics. Gaining competence is difficult because our training was in other disciplines.

Finally, the last stage of my argument was more psychological than philosophical. In essence, I argued that our professional knowledge about teaching complex understandings and rule behavior would lead inevitably to a change in our current professional practices in areas of training professionals, publishing scholarly works and association actions. I believe the argument could be made just as well on philosophic grounds. In brief, if we are committed to concepts of duty, obligation or right actions as basic to our professional status, that commitment should lead to a better philosophic definition and understanding of what we mean by those terms and that understanding in turn would lead to the specific duty of creating appropriate conditions to foster virtuous behavior.

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